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Statement Piece: The Kimono Jacket Trend

Elizabeth Kramer

The kimono has been strongly resurgent in the fashion cycle. In 2014 a British newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, reported that kimono were 'the fashion hit of the summer, establishing themselves on the high street after being snapped up by thousands of sunseekers and festival-goers'.¹ This trend was embraced by a diverse range of global consumers. In Tokyo, for example, one Japanese consumer purchased her kimono jacket, manufactured in Morocco, from the Spanish fast fashion retailer Zara in spring 2014 to wear with skinny jeans (KIM221).² In Canada, a vintage kimono dealer described her clientele as: 'the boho chic 20-something festival-goer who pairs a kimono with shorts and a tank top; 30-somethings who don the kimono in lieu of a blazer with jeans and slip dresses; and women in their 40s, 50s and 60s who are drawn to its glamour and drama'.³ While some donned such vintage pieces, garments available on the high street that were marketed as kimono often bore little resemblance to the Japanese original other than sharing its characteristic T-shape and flowing form. Kimono jackets associated with the mid-2010s trend were offered in a variety of shapes, lengths, materials and ornamentation. Some reference the kimono in form but not in fabric, such as the half- and full-length garments retailed by the American bohemian fashion and lifestyle company Free People, which have wide sleeves but are patterned with Native American and South Asian motifs (KIM224). The Zara jacket, on the other hand, has narrow sleeves and a pocket, but recalls Japanese designs with its colourful peonies juxtaposed with cherry blossoms and bamboo leaves, rendered as though painted with a brush (KIM221). Some kimono jackets were constructed of lace and many were fringed, totally unlike Japanese garments (KIM223). The motifs were highly varied, drawing even upon animal fur or snakeskin. Despite this diversity, these garments were deliberately marketed as 'kimono', even though the terms 'jacket', 'cover-up', 'shawl' or 'cardigan' seem equally applicable. However, because of its long history in and outside Japan, the kimono has come to signify beauty, luxury, singularity and fashionability in a way these other terms do not.

Given the fine fabrics from which they can be constructed and the various ways in which they can be embellished, kimono are universally regarded as artistic productions and their flat form has often been compared to the canvas of a painting. The historical association of kimono and the 'artistically minded' is significant, given the connection between kimono jackets of the mid-2010s and the marketing of a bohemian lifestyle.⁴ Textiles and clothing from many cultures, including kimono, have long been incorporated into bohemian dress as demonstrated by the dress styles of the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century and the hippie fashions of the 1960s, both of which sought to visually disassociate wearers from the Establishment or status quo.⁵ As Elizabeth Wilson has pointed out, however, bohemianism no longer refers to 'the fanatical dedication to art and authenticity of the artist who turned his back on worldly compromise ... now it is used to describe glamorous personalities just outside of the mainstream of Hollywood or the rock industry'.⁶ In the early years of the twenty-first century kimono were incorporated into the wardrobes



KIM221
LENA YAMAGUCHI IN KIMONO JACKET, RETAILED BY ZARA, 2014
Tokyo, January 2019
Photograph by Allie Yamaguchi

KIM224
FULL-AND HALF-LENGTH KIMONO, RETAILED BY FREE PEOPLE, 2014
Publicity photograph, styled by cheesecake from the FP Me Community (tbe)

KIM223
KIMONO JACKET, RETAILED BY TOPSHOP, 2014
Polyester velvet devoré, fringing
London, 2014
Private Collection

KIM276
FLORENCE WELCH AT GLASTONBURY FESTIVAL
Somerset, June 2013
Getty Pictures



of celebrities in a style known as boho-chic, which was directly influenced by historic bohemian and hippie dress. Boho-chic was a lifestyle associated with imagination, creativity and individuality, in which such connotations were evoked through dress and objects that appear exotic, unusual, intricate or luxurious in form, material or decoration, even when, paradoxically, they were mass-produced. The kimono jacket trend of the mid-2010s ticked all these boxes, and was hailed as a ‘statement piece’ that, through its lavish, colourful or intricately embellished nature, could be used to transform an ordinary outfit into something extraordinary.

Mass manufacture and advances in synthetic materials have made these garments widely accessible and relatively inexpensive. The mid-2010s kimono jacket was constructed of silk, velvet or synthetics mimicking finer fabrics to produce a draped effect, accentuated by a heavy fringe, embroidery or lace. Drapery has long been associated with art, elegance, luxury and wealth, as has embroidery, lace and fringing as such trimmings were rare and costly until industrial production made them affordable.⁷ The kimono jacket retailed by Topshop in 2014, for example, is made of polyester velvet devoré which gives it a luxurious feel and appearance (KIM223).

Seen and used outside Japan as a loose, easy-on/easy-off garment, the kimono is also held to flatter a variety of body types, making it a desirable cover-up at the beach. As a draped form, the kimono thus suits a variety of physiques as it functions ‘as a foil to the figure and sets it off, improving its natural proportions’.⁸ As well as on the beach, kimono featured prominently at summer festivals in the mid-2010s (KIM276). This was widely reported in fashion news and, crucially, images featuring the styling of these garments were shared through social media networks. Retailer New Look sold 40,000 kimono per week following the summer festivals in 2014, and global retailers incorporated a sales category on their websites related to festival fashion, in which the kimono featured heavily.⁹ In 2016 the budget e-tailer boohoo, for example, encouraged the consumer to ‘Bop to the beat in a boho-inspired kimono’ on its Festival Shop web page.

Performance seems to be at the heart of the success of the kimono trend, as demonstrated across retail and social media sites documenting festival and streetwear. In many self-styled photographs, the wearers of kimono are frequently captured in dramatic movement or extend their arms to fully display the draped qualities of the garment (KIM224). This highlights the very different experience of wearing kimono as opposed to tailored clothing. The way in which the garment flows around the wearer is enhanced by the fabric from which it is constructed, even more so by the addition of fringing. Drapery and fringing engage multiple senses. One can feel the softness as well as the weight and hear the swish of movement. Artist Gen Doy points out that drapery has long been used by dancers to elevate the clothed form. ‘It mobilises connotations of high art and ideal physical grace and nobility around the female body.’¹⁰ Through its physical properties as well as its historical associations, the affordable kimono jacket allowed its wearer to transcend mundane experience and present herself in an artistic light, a transformation that lies at the heart of the fashionability of this garment.

